

THE OATH OF IMHOTEP: IN RECOGNITION OF AFRICAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO WESTERN MEDICINE

Anthony Carl Pickett, MD
Washington, DC

A large body of primary knowledge supports the claim that Africans in antiquity made many significant contributions to western medicine and were the originators of medicine.¹ Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Isocrates, historians such as Herodotus, and physicians such as Hippocrates and Galen write of this in their works.² Current medical history texts do not adequately reflect the many contributions to modern medicine made by people of color throughout history. This oath was written neither to subvert tradition nor to devalue the impact that early, well-known figures had on western medicine. Rather, it is written in the memory and recognition of the historical father of medicine, Imhotep.³ It alludes to the early African concept of monotheism⁴ in contrast to the Hippocratic oath, which gives praise to the Greek gods and goddesses of health—Apollo, Panacea, Aesculapius, and Hygeia. The oath presented here stands as an alternative.

DISCUSSION

Imhotep would be considered, by today's standards, to be the world's first "multi-" genius. He lived about 3000 BC during the reign of Pharaoh Zoser, in the Third Dynasty. As a member of the pharaoh's court, he was an engineer, architect, scribe, sage, priest, and physician. He is credited with building the stepladder Pyramid of Saqqara and the world's first hospital. He also was responsible for instructing many Greeks on the philosophy and practice of the art of medicine.⁵ In fact,

Isocrates traced the teachings of Hippocrates back to Pythagoras. He claims that Pythagoras, after having studied in Egypt (KiMiT) for 22 years, returned to Greece to impart his newly acquired medical knowledge to his contemporaries.⁶ Anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop contends that KiMiT was a scientific and medical Mecca where "Mediterranean peoples went on a pilgrimage to drink at the fount of scientific, religious, moral, and social knowledge, the most ancient such knowledge that mankind had acquired."⁴

The Edwin Smith Papyrus, probably written around 1500 BC but based on works dating back to about 3000 BC, contains the earliest known information about surgery in use at the time. It describes clinical medicine, the use of experimental scientific observation, and many diagnostic and therapeutic modalities. It reports remarkably accurate observations on physiology, anatomy, and pathology. Breasted attributes its authorship to Imhotep.⁷ The Papyrus describe accurate anatomical-clinical correlations, speaks of the use of cautery, hemostasis, tapes, sutures, and the beginnings of antiseptics with copper salts.⁸ Osler stated that Imhotep was "the first figure of a physician to stand out clearly from the midst of antiquity."⁹

CONCLUSION

It is the hope of this author that this article will provoke thought, discussion, and further personal research, thereby bringing to the fore other individuals whose contributions have gone unrecognized (especially women). The accompanying oath was written in the spirit of the restoration of culture, the reclamation of identity, and in recognition of Imhotep, the historical father of medicine.

From the Howard University College of Medicine, Washington, DC. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr Anthony Carl Pickett, Howard University College of Medicine, Office of the Dean, 520 W St, NW, Washington, DC 20059.

OATH OF IMHOTEP

I swear by this oath, in recognition of Imhotep, healer and physician of antiquity with God as my witness to uphold these lofty values to the best of my ability. To give proper honor to our creator, the greatest physician of all, who has passed down to us these secrets of the art of healing not for our glory, but for the benefit of mankind.

I shall honor those who taught me this art seeing them as my fathers and mothers, and teach this art not only to their children but to others who show aptitude.

I shall pledge my loyalty and support to this institution.

I shall recognize the importance of dietetics in the prevention and cure of most diseases and promote this practice in my patients and myself.

I shall always act in the best interest of my patients, educating them on the benefits of early detection.

I shall recognize the impact that a changing society has on my medical practice and when faced with an ethical dilemma, arrive at a solution through the acknowledgment of the truth and the use of reason.

I shall refrain from sexual practices with my patients and others under my care.

I shall recognize that this position of great power implies great responsibility to my patients, my colleagues, society, and myself.

I shall practice the art of medicine in a conscientious

manner being free of the influence of drugs, alcohol, and all other controlled substances.

I shall seek help for myself when ill and trust my fellow physicians to procure my health and well-being.

I shall aim to relieve suffering where possible and perform no malicious act to bring about the demise of my patients.

I shall champion the cause of health promotion and disease prevention.

I shall, for the benefit of my patients, view my education as a lifelong process and aim to stay abreast of current developments in my field.

I shall use an interdisciplinary approach to the treatment of disease doing away with all rivalries, and refrain from disrespectful spoken words toward other physicians.

I shall hold this art as secret except in the case when the knowledge that I have gained in confidence may prevent the death of another.

In fulfillment of this oath, GOD grant me a life of JOY and the satisfaction and reward that comes with the restoration of health and bodily function. In violation of this oath, I shall accept and admit my shortcomings and seek the assistance of my colleagues who even then shall remain my brothers and sisters.

—Anthony C. Pickett

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